

# On the Causal Mechanism of Hyperbole

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By Liu Baiyi and Xiao Aili

Hyperbole and lies are very similar in outward appearance, both being the result of exaggeration. Because they are so similar yet so different language phenomena, honest people may hesitate to employ an exaggeration to achieve the powerful rhetorical effect of hyperbole for fear of being considered to be telling a lie. Their concern is justified.

*The Harper Handbook of College Composition*, (1981), labels exaggerated expressions as misleading and ludicrous rather than appropriate or picturesque. It categorically advises its readers to "avoid exaggeration." But though this advice may seem reasonable, our students raise the following questions: Why did Shakespeare and Dickens use exaggeration freely and receive critical acclaim? What factor makes an exaggeration a hyperbole rather than a lie? This paper will try to answer the above questions.

## Case Study

To start our discussion, two examples of successful hyperbole are provided to see how they achieve a desired rhetorical effect:

*Example I:* I haven't seen you for ages!

Although the word "ages" (an obviously improper length of time) is used here by the speaker to indicate the interval between two meetings, the listener would neither interpret the statement as illogical nor accuse the speaker of telling a lie. On the contrary, the listener would infer that the speaker regrets not seeing him/her more often and that there is a degree of affection between them.

Why do we ignore what is illogical? We think it is mainly because:

1. Both the speaker and the listener know how long the interval really is; and
2. The statement is too far away from the truth for the listener to believe it represents the literal meaning of what the speaker wished to convey.

On hearing the statement, the listener may ponder a bit, albeit briefly, to work out the real meaning, and the direct result would be the listener coming to the understanding that what the speaker is conveying is his subjective feeling about an objective fact- "What a long time that comparatively short interval seems to be!" Based on this understanding, the listener will find in himself a similar feeling which echoes the speaker's. This echo signals that the listener understood the speaker's emotional intent which in itself brings a degree of positive bonding to their relationship. We think that is the best effect a successful hyperbole can have.

*Example II:* Lodovico, I could kill you forty times a day!

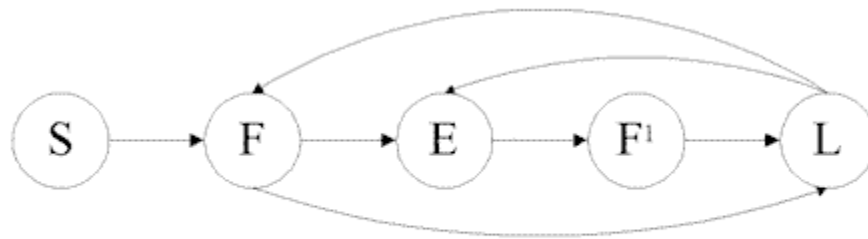
Because everybody knows that people can die only once, the listener will realize immediately that what the speaker wants to convey here is personal emotion-a hatred so strong that it reaches a degree where the speaker could kill Lodovico forty times a day.

We see five variables involved in successful transmission of a hyperbole: S (the speaker); E (the emotion of the speaker); F (the fact); F1 (the exaggerated fact); L (the listener).

If we can successfully find out their relationship and display them in a visible pattern, we may be able to describe the causal mechanism of hyperbole and advance our understanding of its nature.

## The Patterns

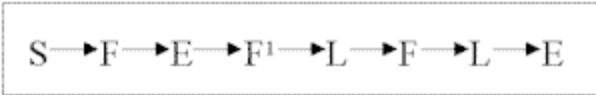
According to the order in which the five variables exert their influence in transmitting a hyperbole, we designed the following pattern to show their interrelationships:



Pattern I:  
Relational components of a hyperbole

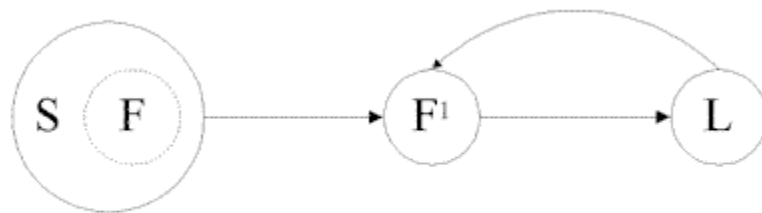
The above pattern displays the following process: First, the speaker (S) perceives a certain fact (F) which arouses a certain feeling or emotion (E). For the purpose of expressing that personal emotion, the speaker exaggerates the fact (F1) and through the medium of language, conveys the exaggerated fact to the listener (L). Because F1 is obviously illogical, the listener starts to search his mind for the real fact (F). He/she then starts to judge the real purpose of the speaker. Finally, as the result of the workings of his/her mind, the listener comes to the understanding that what the speaker wishes to convey is colored by his/her strongly subjective, personal emotion (E).

In Pattern I, there is a circuit symbolizing the process wherein an illogical statement is understood as a reasonable expression of emotion. We may say that this circuit reveals the causal mechanism of hyperbole. Its completion is totally dependent on whether the fact (F) is known or is able to be judged by the listener. Now if we change Pattern I into a pure linear processing formula, we may get:



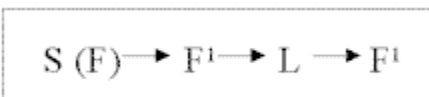
In the above formula, the circuit of pattern I is expanded with L->F->L->E to represent the process by which the listener recalls the fact and works out in his/her mind the real meaning the speaker wishes to convey, finding an echo of the speaker's emotion in himself/herself. Therefore, theoretically the causal mechanism of hyperbole can be symbolically indicated as the psychological process of L->F->L->E. The spark behind this psychological processing is the substantial difference between the real fact and the exaggerated fact. If our statement does not initiate that process, our listeners will take F1 as a real fact. In this case, the consequence may be that we are considered to be telling a lie, although that is not at all our intention.. This is the phenomenon that *The Harper Handbook* labels as "misleading," but it occurs only when there is not a big enough difference between F and F1 in our statement. We will analyze this further at a later point.

The above discussion has brought us to an understanding of the nature of a lie:

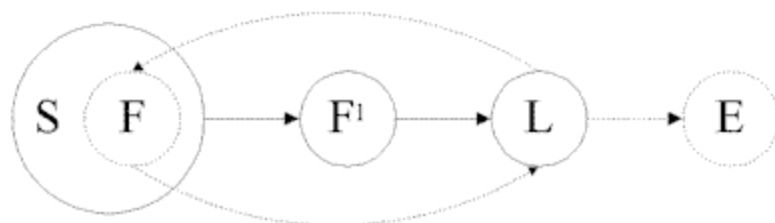


**Pattern II:**  
Relational components of a lie

As indicated in Pattern II, the factual substance (F) of a successful lie is kept from the listener by the speaker, the result being, that the listener accepts F1 as F. Nothing emotional is involved in a successful lie. So its processing formula is:



Often people see through lies because they find out the hidden facts. In such cases, because successful mental work is involved, a similar psychological circuit is formed with modifications to Pattern II:



Pattern III:  
Relational components of an unsuccessful lie

As indicated in Pattern III, once the listener has doubts about what he/she has been told, and ultimately discovers the fact, negative feelings will be felt toward the speaker. These feelings of disgust and contempt distinguish lies from hyperboles which are founded upon facts known by both speaker and listener. We use "E1" to indicate this negative emotion. Generally speaking, perception of lies is more or less accidental. That is why dotted lines were used to indicate this process. The linear formula is:

$$S(F) \rightarrow F^1 \rightarrow L (L \rightarrow F \rightarrow L \rightarrow E^1)$$

## Comparisons and Differentiations

Based on the previous discussion, comparisons can be made between hyperbole and lies in the following three areas:

**Structural differences.** As demonstrated in Patterns I and II, successful hyperbole and lies have different inner structures. This difference is mainly reflected in the existence or absence of the structure  $L \rightarrow F \rightarrow L \rightarrow E$ . Although sometimes a similar structure, 1,  $L \rightarrow F \rightarrow L \rightarrow E^1$ , may be present in a lie as Pattern III states, that is the symbol of an even greater difference-the death of a lie. So  $L \rightarrow F \rightarrow L \rightarrow E$  is the mechanism which gives life to hyperbole, but death to a lie.

**Different preconditions and purpose.** In hyperbole, exaggeration is used under the precondition that the fact is known or can be deduced by the listener. The  $F^1$  here is provided for the purpose of suggesting the degree of a very strong emotion which is so particular that ordinary expressions are insufficient to convey the strength of emotion felt by the speaker. By contrast, in telling a lie, exaggeration is used under the precondition that the real fact is unknown and beyond inference.  $F^1$  in this case is simply provided for direct acceptance by the listener as a fact.

**Different degrees of exaggerations:** Since the difference between  $F$  and  $F^1$  is used to start the psychological process of in hyperbole, it is essential to make that difference substantial. So the fact is always exaggerated to the degree of almost infinite extremes. The saying of "ages" in Example I and "forty times a day" in Example II are good examples of extreme exaggerations. An additional example can be given which extends to infinity:

*Example III:* The day will finally come when every inch of the earth is populated with human beings.

"Every inch of the earth" is obviously an infinite exaggeration. It successfully conveys the intensity of concern about the explosive growth of the human population. But in telling a lie for the purpose of making people believe (or at least temporarily accept) a false statement, exaggeration can be used only to a limited extent. Usually F1 is quite close to F, or within the allowance of common sense. Even a very slight excess can cause total failure of the speaker's communicative purpose.

When we listen to a comedian who uses hyperbole, we are often sealed into a momentary silence by his/her crazy exaggerations. But all of a sudden, we burst into loud and happy laughter after working out his/her real meaning and intention. But when hearing a lie, we do not sense an exaggeration, and that is why we get so angry at having been fooled when we later find out the truth.

The above discussion has provided enough evidence to differentiate between hyperbole and lies. Now we can use that powerful rhetorical device more confidently. Whenever we have a strong personal feeling or emotion toward an objective fact, and we want others to share our feeling, we should exaggerate that fact to such a degree that it is beyond the allowance of common sense-so much so that others are shocked at our bold and even crazy ideas. We will have successfully evoked in them the psychological process of L->F->L->E which eventually enables them to share our emotion.

## Conclusion

Twins are a very common phenomenon. In the area of human language, hyperbole and lies are another pair having the same mother-exaggeration. They look similar, but they can still be differentiated. Hyperbole depends on the existence of the L->F->L->E structure while a lie rests its existence on the absence of this structure.

It is not very difficult to employ hyperbole while avoiding a lie. The most successful deceiver in the world is not benefited by using hyperbole, and the greatest writers in our history are held in esteem not because they know how to deceive. Hyperbole provides an effective language device we can use in conveying our special and personal ideas. We should teach our students how to use it.

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